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The CIA at Harvard

The case of a Harvard professor who took money from the CIA raises grave questions about scholarly integrity and about the proper relations between universities and intelligence agencies.

Nadav Safran, the director of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, received $100,000 from the CIA to write a book about Saudi Arabia and $45,000 to fund a conference on Islamic fundamentalism at the Harvard center. Safran did not disclose the CIA funding until the Harvard administration made him disclose it.

Safran seems to have violated Harvard's rules on the arrangements a faculty member should make when taking money from the CIA. Harvard requires that all contracts go through the university and that they be overt.

Some of Safran's colleagues have asked him to resign, and the university has conducted a review of the matter. What Harvard decides to do in the egregious case of Safran is primarily an internal matter. A larger and more crucial issue was raised in a letter written by 20 graduate students at the center who want Harvard to change its policy.

Rather than having the university enforce its guidelines more carefully or change its procedures for channeling CIA funds, they want the center to cease taking money from intelligence agencies altogether.

Their proposal makes sense, and should be applied not only to the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, but to all scholars and academic institutions.

In the case of the center, the harm done by Safran's behavior is clear and explicit. Foreign scholars attending the conference on Islamic fundamentalism were shocked and compromised by the disclosure of CIA funding. One, an Egyptian, disembarked from a long plane trip, learned of the scandal, and immediately booked a return flight to Cairo. Graduate students at the center risk having their research projects abroad canceled. In a broader sense, anyone associated with the center, or with Harvard itself, has come under a cloud of suspicion.

These consequences are bad enough, yet they are only the inconveniences of a tainted reputation. The worst damage done to scholars and students when a university permits them to sign contracts with an intelligence service is a mutation of their professional purpose.

In totalitarian societies, scholars and intellectuals are not allowed to pursue truth for its own sake; they are expected, and coerced, to work for the state. In an open society, scholars, teachers and intellectuals should be able to think freely – and this means being free of service to the state. The scholar who works for a government intelligence agency ceases to be an independent spirit, a true scholar.

This is not a matter of appearances, but of essence.